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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a literature review and the author's views on the male role in parenting, including the choice not to parent. The traditional view of male parenting is reviewed, with an emphasis on the effects of the traditional paternal role on the development of children. The materials shift in focus to a broader consideration of the traditional male role, e.g., the hazards of the sex stereotyped male role including shorter life expectancy, unmet needs, and exposure to greater stress. Alternative roles are suggested, including increased involvement in parenting and participating as a co-parent in the nurturance and care of children. A third option is also proposed, i.e., a father role outside the nuclear family that encompasses single parent adoption or father custody in divorce. The option not to parent is also considered in this review. (JAC)

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A Male Perspective on Parenting and Non-Parenting*

Ronald F. Levant, Ed.D. **

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In this paper I will present a brief sketch of some of my emerging thoughts regarding the male role in parenting, including the choice to not parent. I will first consider the traditional view of male parenting, with an emphasis on the effects of the traditional paternal role in the development of children. Second, I will shift the focus from parenting to a broader consideration of the traditional male role. In this part of the paper I will discuss the hazards, particularly for males, of the sex stereotyped male role. Finally, I will discuss the non-stereotyped alternative possibilities for being a male parent or non-parent.

A Critique of the Traditional Paternal Role

Traditional Views of Male Parenting

The traditional psychological and sociological views of the man's role in the family places him to the outside, interfacing between the family and society, functioning to provide the family with needed resources, and operating within the family primarily as the chief disciplinarian.

The traditional psychological view of the role of the father derives from Freud's (1963) psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalysis contains a theory of personality development within the context of the family. According to this theory, the most crucial events occur during the first five years of life. During this time the child is preoccupied with the gratification of libidinal desires which are attached sequentially to different bodily zones as he/she matures. The role of the family during these years is to help the child develop an executive ego by providing gratification of needs as well as guidance for their appropriate expression. For the early stages the mother's role is predominant, as is the caretaking-nurturing functioning. It is only in the fifth year that the father's role becomes significant. During this oedipal-electral stage, the father's role is thought to be more important for

boys than for girls. For girls he serves only as a sought after but ultimately renounced love object. With boys, however, he appears as a punitive figure, threatening castration as punishment for incestual fantasies. It is in this role of harsh disciplinarian that he becomes the precurser of the boy's superego, which is achieved through processes of identification with the father and introjection of his image.

The traditional sociological view of the role of men in the family derives from the work of Parsons (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Parsons proposed that, in order to provide adequately for the personality development of children, there should be clear gender-linked differentiation of the male and female roles. He used the instrumental-expressive dichotomy, in which the male role is instrumental, oriented toward task performance and the interface with the external world, and the female role is expressive, oriented internally, toward the affective and affectional needs of the family.

Thus, from both psychological and sociological sources, the traditionally prescribed role for the father is either distant or punitive. I would like to keep this point in view as we consider both the clinical research on the role of the family in the development of psychopathology, and the empirical research on parental factors influencing child development.

Clinical Research on the Family

There has been a substantial amount of research effort devoted to the clinical examination of the families of disturbed individuals. This work originated in the 1940's, and focussed initially on schizophrenia. Some of the earlier work looked only at mothers, and observed an overinvolvement of mothers with their children -- e.g. Levy's (1943) concept of maternal overprotection and Fromm-Reichmann's (1948) formulation of the "schizophrenogenic mother." In the 1950's investigators began to study whole families. They used

systems ideas, in which there was an emphasis on viewing the interlocking nature of family roles. Studies such as those of Lidz (Lidz, Cornelison, Fleck & Terry, 1957) and Bowen (1960) found a quality in the role of fathers of disturbed children which complemented that of the over involved mother -- namely, the fathers were either aloof, distant or uninvolved, or ineffectual in dealing with intra-familial issues. Furthermore, there are studies such as Bandura and Walter's (1959) which showed an association between father absence and disturbance (delinquency) in offspring.

Despite the many methodological limitations of this body of clinical studies (of which I have cited only a very small fraction), there seems to be a preponderance of evidence associating the distant or ineffectual or absent father with disturbance in the children. These findings seem to argue in a direction opposite to that taken by Parsons -- namely that there should be a higher degree of involvement of the father with internal family functions.

Child Development Research

Lamb (1976) has reviewed the research concerning the role of the father in child development. He found that, contrary to traditional views, the father is clearly an important figure to the infant. "This is demonstrated by evidence showing the importance of a warm father-child relationship, established early in infancy, in fostering well-adjusted development, and conversely, by studies showing the retarding influence of a hostile, rejecting, or maladjusted father." (p. 33)

There is some evidence of parental role differentiation during infancy, with mothers assuming the caretaker function, and fathers assuming the role of playmate. A recent study (Biller, 1974) observed that fathers and mothers interact differently with infants. Mothers are more likely to inhibit the exploratory activities of their babies, whereas fathers are more likely to encourage

these activities. This suggests that fathers may play an important role in the ego development of children, particularly in the fostering of a sense of competence (White, 1963).

With regard to older children, fathers play a major role in fostering cognitive development, moral development, and sex role adoption (of both sons and daughters -- the former presumably by a dynamic process of identification and the latter presumably by a Parsonian process of complementation). Moreover, father absence is found to have an adverse effect on these three aspects of development. Sex role adoption begins much earlier than posited by psychoanalytic theory -- sex typing of behavior is found to occur by 18 months. Lamb (1976) concludes "the masculinity of sons and femininity of daughters are greatest when fathers are nurturant and participate extensively in childrearing. Thus the father's similarity to a caricatured stereotype of masculinity is far less influential than his involvement in what are often portrayed as female activities" (p. 23).

In summary, the child development research literature suggests that, contrary to Freud, the father's role is important from early infancy; and that, contrary to both Freud and Parsons, the essential ingredient of the paternal role is warmth and affection (with encouragement of exploration and representation of society's values as secondary components of the role). Thus the empirical research literature, like the clinical research literature, does not support the traditional views of paternity.

A Critique of the Traditional Male Role

Stereotyped Male Role Behavior

Recently, with the impetus provided by the feminist social scientific perspective, there has been a critical examination of the traditional male role. Brannon (1976) provided one of the more systematic attempts to examine stereo-

typed male role behavior. He has abstracted four dimensions which describe the various situational-specific manifestations of stereotyped male role behavior:

1. "No Sissy Stuff": the need to be different from women
2. "The Big Wheel": the need to be superior to others
3. "The Sturdy Oak": the need to be independent and self-reliant
4. "Give 'Em Hell": the need to be more powerful than others, through violence if necessary (Brannon, 1976, p. 12).

Most recently, Cicone and Ruble (1978) have reviewed the emerging literature on the male role as perceived by others, and developed a three-fold categorization of the ascribed traits. Their scheme omits the negative dimension (i.e., to not be like women) within Brannon's scheme. The three categories are described in terms of the general areas to which they apply:

1. How a man handles his life (active and achievement-oriented)
2. How a man handles others (dominant)
3. How a man handles his psyche (level headed) (Cicone & Ruble, 1978, p. 11)

The Hazards of the Traditional Male Role

The traditional male role is a very self-denying and stoic/heroic combination of characteristics, which however take its toll. Harrison (1978) examined the differences in life expectancy for American men and women (68.7 and 76.5 years, respectively, in 1975), and attempted to partial out the contributions due to biogenetic and psychosocial factors. He concluded that sex role socialization accounts for the lion's share of men's shorter life expectancy.

Jourard (1971) was one of the first to examine the hazards of the male role for men. Starting from the premise that men have the same underlying psychological needs as women (such as the need to be known and to know others, to love and be loved, and to find purpose and meaning in life) he described how the

traditional male role delimits the gratification of these needs. Harrison (1978, p. 68-69) has shown how the stereotyped male role puts men in a double-bind: "If a man fulfills the prescribed role requirements, his basic human needs go wanting; if these needs are met, he may be considered, or consider himself, unmanly."

There appear to be several specific sex role factors which increase men's mortality rate. One of the major factors is smoking. Smoking has been an essential accoutrement of the traditional male sex role, elevated almost to the level of a secondary sex characteristic during the Bogart era. Waldron and Johnson (1976) have found that, compared with women, men started smoking at an earlier age, smoke more, smoke more of each cigarette, inhale more, inhale more deeply, and smoke in a greater variety of forms. Smoking has been cited as the chief reason for the higher mortality rates for men, accounting for between one-third and one-half of the differences in rates (Waldron & Johnson, 1976; Retherford, 1972).

A second factor affecting men's higher mortality is Type A, or Coronary Prone behavior patterns, which are an extreme form of stereotyped male role behavior.

> Type A behavior ... is characterized by rapid speaking/walking/eating, hostility, aggression, impatience, difficulty relaxing, sense of urgency about time, acquisitiveness, preoccupation with work and advancement, and concern about the evaluation of peers and supervisors (Harrison, 1978, p. 79).

Type A behavior is thought to account for about one-sixth of the higher mortality rates for men (Waldron & Johnson, 1976).

Finally, there is a nest of factors associated with greater exposure to stress in the work setting, greater isolation from support structures in the

family, and an inability to handle the effects of stress. In this latter regard, it is instructive to consider the meaning of the higher morbidity rates for women in relation to the higher mortality rates for men. Women are reported to have more physical and emotional illness than men. Ordinarily one would associate a higher illness rate with a higher death rate. However, in this case it appears that what is at work is that the traditional male role inhibits men from both seeking help in the early stages of illness, and from being sufficiently attuned to their own internal processes in order to be able to detect the early warning signals of illness (Waldron & Johnson, 1976; Jourard, 1971).

In summary, it appears that "the male sex role may be dangerous to your health" (Harrison, 1978, p. 65). It should be noted that females may not be entirely exempt from this caveat. There is some speculation that women may be exposing themselves to some of the same hazards as the result of certain changes in sex role behavior, such as the increased incidence of smoking and the adoption of high stress careers.

Non-stereotyped Alternatives for Being a Father or Non-Parent

The traditional male role, including traditional parenting, is thus not a viable model for family life. There is, then, a need to consider alternative possibilities.

Increased Involvement in Parenting

Fein (1978) has described an "emergent" perspective on fathering, which "proceeds from the notion that men are psychologically able to participate in a full range of parenting behaviors, and furthermore that it may be good both for parents and children if men take active roles in childcare and childbearing" (p. 127). This emergent perspective "is androgynous in assuming that the only parenting behaviors from which men are necessarily excluded by virtue of gender

are gestation and lactation" (p. 127).

This emergent perspective on fathering would bring about several changes in the paternal role. The first of these is greater participation of men in pregnancy and childbirth, including participation in childbirth education classes and in labor and delivery. This experience may help fathers to develop a coherent fathering role, a factor which Fein (1976) found to be significantly related to fathers' postpartum adjustment. Krodel (1979) described the experience of male participation in home birthing. He concluded that this can be a profound experience for the couple, one which can greatly heighten their love and commitment.

The second change is participating as a co-parent in the nurturance and care of the children, from neonate status onward. That fathers can establish a significant relationship with their newborns has been demonstrated in a study by Greenberg and Morris (1974), in which they found that fathers began developing ties to their neonates within three days postpartum, a phenomenon called "engrossment." Dorn and Ryan (1979) have considered the problems and strengths of co-parenting, and propose a model of intentional parenthood based on a team approach, in which both parents participate in the breadwinning, domestic, and childcare responsibilities. Levine (1977) and Fein (1978) have considered co-parenting from a social policy perspective, and have highlighted the need for legislation and enlightened corporate policies to sustain this family innovation. This would include policies such as paternity leave, job-sharing by spouses, and flex-time arrangements, whereby workers may adjust their time of arrival and departure according to personal needs.

A third change in the paternal role associated with the emergent perspective is the possibility for the participation of men in the parenting of children outside of the nuclear family context. This includes single men who adopt

children, men who participate as the primary parent of their children following divorce or the death of their spouse, and men who become stepparents to their wives' children in reconstituted families (Stanley & Stuhr, 1979).

Non-parenting

In addition to these possibilities of increased male involvement in parenting, there is also the option to not parent. Recent research by Teicholz (1979) and Hoffman (1979) has shown that the voluntarily childless are no less well adjusted than, and have marriages as satisfying as, those who choose to parent. This has helped to remove the stigma from those who would remain voluntarily childless, thus allowing couples to consider the option of childlessness. In all likelihood, the childfree will remain a small minority. But having childlessness as a choice enables couples to seriously consider whether they wish to parent, and to make an intentional choice either way.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a brief overview of some of my thoughts regarding paternity. I first took a critical perspective on the traditionally prescribed paternal role, examining its negative effects on children. I then took a critical perspective on this male sex role in general, examining its negative sequellae for men. Finally I sketched some of the emerging non-stereotyped alternatives, from increased male involvement in parenting to non-parenting.

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